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ABSTRACT

Discussed in this paper are elements of an empirically adequate definition of social conflict, issues of conflict, and interactions between conflict and social relationships. Social conflict is initially defined as overt opposition between at least two people. Additional implications and facets of unilateral and mutual opposition are subsequently explored. Discussion of conflict issues touches briefly on the necessity of considering the meaning of manifest issues, and the possibilities of symbolic and changing issues within any one conflict episode. Highlighted in the discussion of children's conduct in conflict episodes are (1) social developmental findings concerning strategy differences when friends are in conflict with acquaintances, and (2) sociolinguistic findings on the function of oppositions in pretend play episodes and on individuals' active reasoning in their discussions of sociomoral issues. The topic of interactions between conflict and social relationships is discussed in terms of the function of conflict in increasing familiarity, and the effects familiarity may have on conflict behavior. (RH)

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The Promises and Perils of Social Conflict

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This paper was presented as the discussion of the symposium, "Conflicts between Children: Opportunities and Dangers for Development," at the meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Baltimore, MD, in April, 1987. Correspondence may be sent to me at the Department of Psychology, Wayne State University, 71 West Warren Avenue, Detroit, MI 48202.

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The Promises and Perils of Social Conflict

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In this symposium today you have heard significant papers on conflicts between children,¹ significant because they are addressed to fundamental aspects of conflict: events that give rise to disputes and fights, how adversative episodes are conducted, and various factors of individuals and settings that influence conflict behavior.

As such, each participant has addressed the larger issue of how conflict functions in both enduring relationships such as friendship (Hartup & Laursen), and in more immediate relationships such as children playing (Hay, Caplan, & Vespo; Garvey) and children and adolescents discussing moral issues (Berkowitz). In doing so, conflict is being "contextualized" to reveal its relation to ongoing social relationships. This emphasis accords well with the view of Harre, Clarke, and DeCarlo that the study of behavior "is a matter not of taking things to pieces to see what they are made of, but rather of putting them together to see what they are part of" (1985, p. 25).

Before discussing directly what these papers reveal in their "putting together" conflict with other social relations, it is imperative, in my view, to be clear about the phenomenon of social conflict. In doing so, I will be at odds with Harre et al. by "taking to pieces" a conflict episode to clarify the definition of social conflict.

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

What is it, exactly, that we are talking about when we use the term social "conflict"? Is it just another word for competition or aggression? No, as we have heard in some of the papers today, conflict can not be equated with competition (although competition may structure the conflict) nor can it be equated with aggression (although aggression may set off a conflict or it may be used in the course of a conflict episode).

Social conflict is defined as overt opposition between at least two people. That basic definition is shared, I believe, by the symposium members. The definition of conflict can be most readily understood, perhaps, by taking apart a single, simple conflict episode as illustrated in Figure 1. On the extreme left are A and B, standing for two children who compose a dyad. The horizontal base represents microgenetic time (essentially, seconds or minutes), the left representing the onset of what turns out to be a conflict episode and proceeds to the right to the eventual end of the episode. Along

the upper part is A's behavior; along the bottom, B's behavior.

Let us walk through the episode to see the major features of a conflictual interaction. First, Child A does or says something--gives a command or a request, offers help, hits B "out of the blue," etc. The act may be positive, neutral, or negative.² A's act may not even be directed at B--A might be humming to herself, or reaching for a glass of juice. Virtually any behavior at all by A can constitute "Act 1," but what is critical is that B responds to the act by protesting, refusing, denying--opposing A's behavior in some way. At this point in microgenetic time, we have unilateral opposition (that is, one child has protested another child's behavior). Some researchers would say that a state of conflict now exists because opposition by one child has occurred. In this symposium, that position is represented in the work of Hartup and Laursen, and Hay et al. Other researchers, however, require more to define a state of conflict: A responds to B with counteropposition. In this case we have mutual opposition. My preference for defining social conflict as mutual opposition is noted in Figure 1 by the "YES" box. I'll return shortly to the reasons for this preference.

Now, to continue our "walk," once mutual opposition occurs, the conflict episode proceeds, perhaps very briefly or for many minutes, by each child trying in various ways (called "strategies" here) to overcome the other's opposition or resistance. Eventually the episode ends, perhaps by both abandoning the conflict, resolving it, or a third party intervenes, etc. This then is the temporal structure of natural conflicts based on the definition of overt mutual opposition.

We need to consider this definition a bit further despite the fact that matters of definition often seem to be dreary matters. In fact, they are critical to progress in understanding any phenomenon, in my view. Sometimes research findings on particular topics--say, aggression or temperament--are remarkably inconsistent or ambiguous not so much due to the oft-cited factors of different samples or methods but to the fundamental fact that different behaviors are studied. The differences are masked by using the same term.

Now in the case of social conflict, most observers of natural conflicts often state or appear to use "overt opposition" as the basic definition of the phenomenon. But there is a difference lurking within this general, agreed-to definition: the difference between unilateral and mutual opposition. Because there may be important differences in the types of social phenomena bounded by each definition, let us briefly consider the two types of oppositional states. A unilateral definition captures many behaviors, as for example simple routines of the following type: A requests, B refuses, A drops request (A: "Can I use your pencil?"; B: "No, I need it." A: "OK"). These are frequent events and are best viewed, I think, as simple exchanges of information. They seem to miss the more dynamic, significant events which is required if one uses the definition of conflict as mutual opposition. This is premised on the notion that opposition to others takes effort, and to oppose one who is opposing the self is an indication that there is something of significance to both parties. Although one can make the argument on conceptual grounds that unilateral and mutual opposition definitions capture quite different phenomena, that has yet to be demonstrated empirically.

Suffice it to say that this discussion of definitions is to alert researchers to the importance of definitions, in general, and to considering the issue of unilateral versus mutual definitions in particular.

ISSUES OF CONFLICT

One fundamental question is: What do people get into conflict about? What is the issue, the bone of contention, that sets off arguments, quarrels, and fights? Whether the disputants are children with one another, parents and children, spouses, scientists, or nations, the issues are presumably touching points of significant matters--what really matters to the participants at the moment.

The question of issues was addressed directly today by Hay et al. They asked, "To what extent are very young children object-oriented, bent on possessing and using an object, versus are socially-oriented, bent on influencing and controlling others?" By varying the conditions--many objects versus few objects available--they found that the number of objects made little difference in conflict rate (and this finding stands in contrast to a good deal of evidence that among animals scarce valued resources increase conflict). Why so little effect? Perhaps, they speculate, because the "real" issue at stake was behavioral/social control, not only object control.

This brings us to a complicated question: How should we conceptualize issues of conflict? If we are not thoughtful about this question, we may become very misled. Many aspects of issues deserve consideration--whether manifest or symbolic, stable or changing, single or multiple--but I can only touch on a few aspects here.

Most researchers of children's conflicts use the manifest "bone of contention," those acts requiring the least degree of inference. That is, the topic of the dispute is identified by what the adversaries say to one another, or are doing (such as a nonverbal struggle over an object). And the manifest issues of children's disputes are often the possession and use of objects, social control, and matters of fact and opinion, as a recent review of research showed (Shantz, 1987). Interestingly, these are frequent issues in adults' conflicts, too.

But along with such manifest issues, there may well be latent issues, too, in disputes. One illustration must suffice. Acus (1981) described a conflict between two sisters about the way their toothbrushes should be arranged in the bathroom. A trivial issue on the surface of it. But it was only one manifestation of a central theme in many of their conflicts: which girl can be "next to" (have the attention of, monopolize) the parents (represented here by the parents' toothbrushes). When an issue is important to a person, no event is too small to turn it into a symbol of enduring (and, at times, cosmic) significance! Such symbolic issues may be identified most readily when one has observations of a particular dyad over time such that recurrent patterns emerge, that is, the latent themes of disputes. Many researchers who work with clinical samples--disturbed children and disturbed families--recognize the complex, symbolic meanings disputes may have.

Not only do we need to be alert to possible symbolic issues of conflict, but to the possibility of multiple manifest issues within any one conflict episode. The work of Hay et al. suggests multiple, simultaneous issues. And, further, there may be multiple, sequential issues. Deutsch (1973), in particular, described conflicts with "fluid issues" which, he found, were often "destructive conflicts." That is, the adversaries move from one issue to another with no settlement of any issue, operating as if they were saying to themselves "Now that we're in this fight, I'm going to tell you what else bothers me about you and your behavior."

In summary, how researchers conceptualize the issues of conflict is very significant for our future understanding of the role of conflict in ongoing social relationships. Today I have touched briefly on the necessity to consider the meaning of manifest issues, and the possibilities of symbolic and changing issues within any one conflict episode (see Shantz & Hobart, in press).

HOW CONFLICT BETWEEN CHILDREN IS CONDUCTED

Two primary approaches have been taken by researchers to children's conflicts. On this panel today, the sociolinguistic approach of examining in detail what individuals say to one another and the sequence of their statements is represented in the research by Garvey and by Berkowitz. Garvey's study documents how oppositions work during pretend play episodes: children's skillful offering of alternatives to one another which appear to serve the larger goal of keeping the pretend frame going. And Berkowitz provides a close-up view of individuals' active reasoning in their discussions of sociomoral issues, re-representing the others' opinions and arguments as "minds meet" and "minds miss" in the ongoing flow of talk. Here we see how young children show less "meeting of minds" in their discussions than do older individuals (that is, the evidence of less clustering of "transacts" in the stream of talk and the greater frequency of changing topics).

The other approach to conflict by researchers--social developmental--is represented today in the papers by Hartup and Laursen, and by Hay et al. The former paper addressed strategy differences when friends are in conflict versus acquaintances in conflict. One major finding was that "standing firm" or insisting on one's position occurred less often between friends (as defined in this study) than between acquaintances, and, in addition, negotiating occurred more often between friends.

CONFLICT AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

These findings on the issues and strategies of conflicts lead us back to the initial question I raised: What is conflict a part of? What larger social matters relate to conflict? One answer--of course, a speculative one at this point--is that conflict has a major and positive role in "getting to know" others in the natural course of interactions. Hay and her associates, for example, suggest that conflicts as they are embedded within cooperative, agreeable interchanges serve individuals increasing familiarity with one another. It should be clear that the authors are viewing conflict from a long-range, third-party position, and certainly not attributing to the

participants any conscious aim--to purposely engage in conflict in order to "get to know." Rather, spontaneous conflicts have this effect, they suggest--increasing social knowledge about one another's likes, dislikes, needs, abilities, etc. So, too, Berkowitz's data reveal the process of getting to know how one's partner thinks, reasons, and represents the self's positions. Although we have good evidence that familiarity has a strong impact on social behavior (e.g., Hartup, 1983), we know very little about how to get at the process of increasing familiarity. Indeed, familiarity as currently conceived by some as the product of "mere exposure" seems a weak and rather vague conceptualization of the process. In accord with the explicit and implicit views of some panelists, it is likely that familiarity is especially fostered by the give-and-take between people, that is, the disputes in everyday interaction.

These speculations of the effects conflict may have on familiarity has a complementary direction: the effects familiarity may have on conflict behavior. To the extent that friends are more familiar with one another, in addition to liking one another, we would expect their conflict behavior to differ from that of nonfriends. Hartup and Laursen now have provided some evidence to support that expectation--not for issues, but for strategies. Clearly, an important task for the future is to flesh out how conflict relates to social relationships of various types.³

It is worth noting that the papers and this discussion have been limited to peer conflict, and do not address directly conflict within families which is of central concern to many of you in the audience. Yet, I trust my "taking to pieces" conflict and "putting together" conflict with larger social issues will help to illuminate some of our common interests and concerns.

From a larger perspective, these papers are beginning to help us understand the potentially positive aspects of conflict rather than assuming, as has been so often the case in the past, that conflict is a totally negative phenomenon. As such, we are on the road to documenting both the promises and perils of social conflict for children and their development. And so too for researchers who study conflict, there are promises and perils! I hope this discussion paper has helped highlight some of these--the perils of not being clear on how we define conflict or how we conceptualize issues of conflict, and the promises of beginning to understand the dynamic aspects of interpersonal relations. We thank the participants for sharing with us their inventive research on some fundamental questions about conflict.

Footnotes

¹The papers presented by the participants are indicated by an asterisk in the list of references.

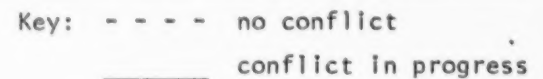
²It is not difficult to understand how a negative act may elicit opposition, as in hitting someone or demanding their money. It is less obvious, perhaps, that normatively positive acts may elicit opposition, too. I might, for example, hug someone who does not want to be hugged, or praise someone who protests the praise.

³In contrast to this focus on social relationships, Garvey alludes to an alternative focus: the activity or "tasks" of the participants (e.g., pretend play). To what extent, she wondered, are the differences in conflict between friends (vs. nonfriends) a reflection of friends being engaged more often in pretense? Could such differences in conflict behavior be due as much to the ongoing activity as to their particular relationship (friend status)? If I understand her point correctly, the implication is that at this early point in studying conflict, we may want to consider both the activity and the relationship simultaneously (e.g., friends-at-pretend-play, friends-at-work, nonfriends-at-pretend-play, etc.) to minimize confounding related aspects of social interaction.

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²Nonresistance may be ignore, yield (comply), positive, or neutral response to Act.

⁴Resolutions may be win/lose, compromise, etc.

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